

“Perhaps a Life Worth Living”
A “Hybrid World” Story
Part 6 - Finale
PTC - 2022

Day 31

Sleep did eventually come for both of them, though not until nearly dawn, and not for nearly long enough. Peng rubbed his eyes, yawned, and stretched, waking Xiao and wandering off to make them some breakfast. They ate in silence, Xiao rinsed the dishes, and when she returned to the living room Peng was there holding a pair of backpacks that smelled like they'd been buried in the back of a closet for far, far too long.

"We...probably should have done this last night," said Peng, trudging up the stairs behind Xiao.

"Yeah, probably," she replied, stepping into her bedroom and sitting on the edge of the bed. Would she have been happy here, if things had merely continued on as they were, if she didn't know what she knew now? Maybe, maybe not. It might have been nice to spend at least a little more time like this, with life finally having returned to something resembling stability. Sure, it could still be scary now and then; they had to be so careful any time they went outside, any time someone came to the door. But she couldn't deny there had been some good times during this short stay, at least, as good as times could be when you were like her in a place like this.

She still only had about a dozen sets of clothes, neatly arranged in the small dresser beside her bed, and they fit into the backpack with plenty of room to spare. A book? Yes, the red one; the first one they'd gone through together. It was barely holding itself together, and she'd fully mastered the hundred or so characters it had within, but the memories far outweighed any lack of utility it might have. The page that Peng had written her name on for her was still tucked inside; that would definitely have to come, too.

Anything else? There was one thing...something that also had more than its fair share of memories attached. The collar. She'd wanted to just cut it up, throw it out, be rid of it forever; but she'd had to put it back on, at least temporarily, any time there was a risk of someone seeing her. Without its battery, it was harmless, and though she would - hopefully - never put it around her neck again, a part of her really wanted to keep it, to bring it with her, to remind her of where she'd come from, what she'd faced, what she'd survived. She threw it into the backpack before she could talk herself out of it, closed the zippers, and went back downstairs to wait for Peng.

He entered a short time later, his backpack looking significantly more full, and sat, giving Xiao a halfhearted smile.

"There's still some time left; if you're...not sure you want to go through with this," he said, almost more to himself than Xiao.

"I know," she replied, looking down at the floor. "I'm...getting pretty scared about it, to be honest."

"As am I. The last time I made such a hasty decision on what I believed was the right thing to do, well. I suppose that's what led to this in the first place."

"But...that one worked out okay in the end, didn't it?"

"It did indeed." He gave her another smile, this one more genuine, though it faded fast. "I want to make sure this is your choice; that I'm not making it for you."

"I know. It...doesn't really feel like much of a choice; I mean, I've probably got it better here than any other Hybrid in the empire right now. But knowing there's so much

more out there, somewhere I don't have to stay trapped inside all day, or worry about uniformed men carrying me off to another cage. I'd probably wind up hating myself eventually if I didn't at least try for that."

Peng nodded solemnly. "And I could never forgive myself if I didn't try to help you achieve it." He looked up at the clock, and sighed. "Alright, I'd best go make the call. Make sure you're ready to go as soon as the car arrives."

The car pulled around to the front of the house a short time later, and Xiao put on her cloak while Peng checked to ensure there were no watchers present on the street. In retrospect, the action seemed a bit pointless; it wasn't as if they would be returning to face any potential consequences from flaunting any rules. Reflexively turning to lock the door behind them was even more of a pointless act, but there would be plenty of time to worry about breaking such habits later.

Xiao got into the car while Peng placed their bags in the trunk, joining her a moment later and shutting the door. He gave the house one last look as the car pulled away, and Xiao watched through the rear windshield as it slowly vanished into the distance.

"Mr. Peng," said the driver, giving them a nod. "A second driver should be waiting by the time we arrive. Once you depart, I'll follow you as far as the entertainment district, then take Miss Xiao somewhere safe to wait for you to enact whatever plan you've managed to put together."

"Heh. Nobody's ever called me that before," said Xiao, quickly covering her mouth.

"Not to worry, Miss Xiao; it's perfectly safe for you to talk here. Mr. Peng?"

Peng frowned, lost in thought, trying to find any flaws or snags he'd missed while there was still a little time to back out.

"Let's see...ten minutes from there...another fifteen...I'll need to step out at the right moment...Yes, that should work." He looked up, slightly startled. "Yes, of course. Give me an hour after that to...finish matters at the palace. And if I...you know what to do."

"Yes, I know. Shouldn't be any trouble getting there in time."

"Good...good. Sorry, I...need to think a bit more."

"Take your time, Mr. Peng."

It was mid-afternoon when they pulled in beside a second car outside the laboratory complex. Peng took a few breaths to steady his nerves, while Xiao looked out, a shiver running down her spine.

"So that's...that's the place, huh? Looks a lot different than it did the first time."

"Yes; back to where it all began, I suppose."

The driver turned, his expression serious. "This is the point of no return, Mr. Peng. Once you step out that door, there's no going back."

Xiao looked up at Peng, reaching out to put a hand on his shoulder. "You can do this."

Peng nodded, patting her hand with his. "I know. I'll see you soon, alright?" He glanced up at the driver. "One hour."

"One hour, Mr. Peng."

With one last deep breath, Peng stepped out of the car, shut the door behind him, and made his way into the lab to retrieve the scientist. Xiao ducked down in her seat when she caught sight of him, covering her head and mumbling to herself.

"Not to worry, Miss Xiao; he can't see you in here. Just make yourself comfortable; we'll be back on the road in no time at all."

The sun was just above the horizon when the two cars passed beyond the quiet residential area, Xiao looking out in awe at the enormous structures rising before them. Peng's car pulled away, making a turn toward the palace, while the other continued forward through the entertainment district, slowing for the crowd outside a building with an elaborate facade, dozens of humans lined up to enter.

"What's that place? It looks important," said Xiao, trying to find something to distract herself.

"That would be the concert hall, Miss Xiao. Looks to be someone of some note giving a speech tonight; that many people headed in, I'd guess it'll be a full house."

"A speech, huh?" A thought struck, and Xiao grinned. It was probably the most dangerous thing she could possibly do right now, but for such an interesting opportunity to present itself at this particular moment, well...she couldn't possibly pass it up. If the driver was willing to go along with it, at least.

"Hey, Mister Driver?"

"Yes, Miss Xiao?"

"I've got my own idea for a little distraction to help out. Tell me what you think."

It was a somewhat warm night, and the rear entrance to the concert hall had been propped open, doubtless by some overheated stagehand. The car slowed to a stop in the shadows just beyond the door's overhead light, and Xiao emerged, wearing her cloak, her old collar in hand, quickly slipping inside and behind a stack of boxes.

The layout was unfamiliar, and a little confusing, but the few people she encountered seemed far too busy with their own tasks to take much notice of a small, cloaked figure sneaking through the backstage areas. One particular person stood out, though, dressed in a very fancy looking black outfit, pacing back and forth just beyond the entrance to the stage, flipping through a stack of papers over and over. He looked important, slightly nervous, and, critically, distracted.

There was a narrow overhang above that the man kept walking beneath, and Xiao looked for some way up, tucking away her collar, eventually finding what turned out to be a slightly difficult climb among ropes and rigging. She watched, waited, and pounced, knocking the man into a wall and onto the floor, wincing from a brief, shooting pain in one leg as she landed awkwardly. It seemed to have paid off, though; the man wasn't getting up, his notes scattered along the floor. He was still breathing, and there didn't seem to be any blood anywhere, so Xiao rubbed her sore leg for a few moments until the pain subsided, watching for any signs of the stagehands she'd seen on the way in.

No one came, though, so she adjusted her cloak, pulling the hood a bit further forward to ensure her face was hidden. It made it a little difficult to see where she was going, but it would be necessary to ensure no one suspected who, or what, was beneath.

She retrieved the collar she'd tucked away in her shirt, sliding it reluctantly around her neck, being careful not to let it latch. With her cloak pulled tightly around her, she took a few breaths, tried to focus her thoughts, and took a few steps forward. The stage was set, the audience was waiting, and her confidence was as high as it was going to get; time for a little public speaking.

Xiao walked out from behind the stage, a spotlight following her as she went. Preemptive applause from the audience faded as confusion set in, replaced by pensive murmurs throughout the crowd. So far it seemed to be working; once again her small stature had come in handy, if only by making it harder to see her clearly from a distance.

The murmurs faded as she stepped up to the lectern, adjusted the microphone, and looked out over the hundreds of unwitting human faces. Oh, this was going to be good. This was going to be very good.

"Good evening," she began, clearing her throat, trying to get her voice just right and match the way Peng always seemed to speak. "Your regularly scheduled speaker for tonight has been postponed, so that I may bring you this brief, but important, story."

More whispers in the crowd. "My name is Xiao. Several weeks ago, I was abducted from my home, transported by truck and thrown in a cage. I was left there to starve for three days before again being forcefully relocated, this time to a private home, my life placed into the hands of a man I did not know. If I attempted to escape, I would be killed. I would eat what I was fed, if and when I was fed it. If I ever spoke or refused to follow an order, I would be punished with excruciating pain. I was absolutely terrified, both for my life and for what sorts of acts could be demanded of me."

"But, as you can see, I am no longer in that place. Thanks to the incredible kindness, unlimited compassion, and tireless efforts of a stranger, that nightmare is now over, and I can be here to speak to you tonight."

Many in the crowd had begun to look uncomfortable, shifting in their seats, or sinking down in an effort to not be noticed.

"Now you may ask yourselves: how and where could such a despicable act occur? Who could possibly be responsible for such a terrible crime? You may be shocked to learn this act occurred here, in this very city, and was committed by your own fellow citizens."

A broad grin crept across Xiao's face as the murmurs began again, sounding decidedly more urgent. She waited for the crowd to quiet down, forcing away the grin before she continued.

"Now, you may be even more shocked to learn that acts like this occur in this very city nearly every day, to hundreds, even thousands of unsuspecting innocents just like me."

It sounded as though a few people were starting to catch on; time for the big reveal. "For you see," she said, pausing to dramatically pull off her cloak and toss it behind her, "I am a Hybrid, just like the ones many of you have locked away in your homes at this very moment."

This got an even more significant reaction. Questions no longer being whispered, shouts of incredulity. Those who did keep Hybrids in their homes could be differentiated from those who didn't based on the amount and sincerity of their surprise. There was some activity at the very back of the hall; a few people running out to no doubt alert the authorities. She'd better keep going, she thought.

"We are not machines. We are not your playthings. We are thoughtful, intelligent individuals, with hopes and dreams; we feel love and sadness, joy and pain, and every other emotion exactly as you do. And above all, we feel fear. My kind live in constant fear of you; you who hold the keys to our lives, who force cruel and pointless rules upon us, who with the push of a button cause more pain than you can possibly imagine."

The audience was shouting, but she was shouting, too. They were going to hear this whether they liked it or not.

"We are not things. We are people. We have names. We can speak, and learn, and grow. We can succeed and we can fail, and when we fail we get back up and try again. We are just like you. Ask yourself if you would do to your neighbor what you would do to us. Ask yourself if you would throw a child in a cage and deprive them of food until they are near starvation. Ask yourself why it is okay to do this to us, to imprison us, to control us."

Her time was almost up. Now for the final flourish.

"My name is Xiao. I am a Hybrid." She reached up to pull off the collar, holding it out for the crowd to see. "And I will not be controlled anymore."

With that, she stepped away from the lectern, giving the crowd one last look before making her way quickly backstage. Chaos erupted behind her, and she continued past the still incapacitated speaker, through the winding corridor, back to the door she'd entered from. She burst through without stopping, and ran to the waiting car, jumping in and pulling the door shut behind her.

"How did it go?" asked the driver.

"That was amazing," said Xiao, grinning. "We should probably go somewhere else before anyone comes back here looking for me. Then we can pick up Peng and get out of this place for good."

"Right you are, Miss Xiao."

Peng walked quickly along the cold, empty corridor, with the scientist at his side and the pair led by two guards. Their footsteps echoed off the high ceiling and through connected hallways as they passed, sounding at times as though dozens of others had joined the procession. The scientist carried with him a worn leather medical bag, containing what Peng hoped would cause enough chaos to cover his and Xiao's escape; while he didn't particularly want anyone to be seriously injured, such an event befalling any of the occupants of the room they were headed toward wouldn't trouble his conscience.

More guards stood beside the large, ornate door leading to the Emperor's audience chambers, directing Peng and the scientist to enter through one of the smaller, more ordinary doors along either side. Once inside, they were ushered to the end of a long, gold-fringed carpet that wound around behind the seated attendees, turned in front of the ornate door, and led straight up the slight incline to the raised, semicircular stage on the far side of the room.

From where they stood, Peng could see one corner of the stage, catching greater glimpses as the crowd shuffled and leaned to one side or the other. A long, translucent curtain was unfurled from the ceiling to obscure the Emperor during his entrance, but from just the right angle, Peng could still make out the hidden door he would enter from. The door slid to one side, and four figures entered; four figures with distinctly pointed

ears, and unmistakable fluffy tails. Hybrids? And fox-types, even!

Xiao's prediction was correct, after all, thought Peng; the Emperor really WAS a Hybrid, as was his entire family, from the looks of things. It still made little to no sense why he was so hateful, so cruel and oppressive toward his own kind; Peng vaguely recalled the scientist's most recent rant, when he'd learned that Hybrids did in fact used to be fully human, and that their differences appeared over the span of several generations. Perhaps the subjugation of the nation's Hybrids began before any signs of the change had appeared in the royal family, and the pointless cruelty was simply a mechanism to keep the populous from even considering they might not be human.

It wasn't as if anyone not a part of the most elite inner-circle would ever see the Emperor in person, and those elites had far, far more to lose by revealing the truth than they could ever hope to gain. And this certainly made the Emperor's patronage of the scientist more understandable; his view of Hybrids as a 'disease' to be 'cured' clearly resonated with the royal family. A 'cure', if such a thing were even possible, would be seen as extremely valuable, a way to return their lineage to the state of 'purity' they spoke of. He hoped they would like the slight change of plans in store for them.

Speaking of which. Now that the Emperor and his family had entered and been seated, there would be a few minutes of meaningless, verbose praise read by one of the royal guards, and the audience would formally begin. This was likely the last opportunity Peng would have to slip away unnoticed, and so while all eyes were on the stage, he slipped back over to the door he had entered from, carefully opening it and stepping back into the grand hallway.

There was, of course, a guard immediately outside the door, and he grabbed Peng by the arm forcefully. "Your presence is required inside," he said, in a sort of shouted whisper. "By direct order of the Emperor!"

"Yes, yes, I am fully aware of that," replied peng, attempting to sound important though also whispering. "The audience has yet to begin and I must attend to the restroom before it does."

"Idiot," said the guard. "You should have been prepared in advance."

"Do you have any idea what the prospect of standing before the Emperor does to the bowels of an old man like me?" Peng fought to keep a straight face while the guard appeared disgusted, and continued. "Why, the shame it would bring to everyone involved would be immeasurable! And the longer you keep me here explaining, the less time I will have!"

The guard finally released Peng's arm, motioning for him to follow. "Ugh, fine. Come with me. And make it quick; you know what will happen if you keep the Emperor waiting."

Around the corner and down a small side hallway, the guard stopped, pointing out an unmarked door. "There. I'll be waiting at the end of the hall to escort you back. Hurry it up."

"Of course, of course," said Peng, walking through the door into what was, given its location in the palace, a very small and plain restroom. The long-winded preamble would be ending any moment now, and he knew the Emperor would want the live demonstration of the scientist's concoction first and foremost. He just needed to wait here until the inevitable commotion that would follow and hope the guard didn't come knocking before then.

Back inside the packed audience chamber, the scientist stood nervously, walking forward as yet more guards led him along the carpet and to the point it turned toward the stage. The curtain was raised, revealing the Emperor and his family to all, and the scientist's eyes went wide.

"The Emperor is a Hybrid?!" he hissed, turning to find his interpreter was no longer there. A bell sounded, and a guard shoved him forward; he stumbled out of the shadows and into view, and glanced around nervously, all eyes directly on him. He suddenly felt very, very alone, walking slowly forward, clutching his bag in front of him.

No, this is no problem, he thought, partially regaining some confidence. That damned interpreter would just get in the way. All they needed to do was show him the test subject he'd be demonstrating his serum on, and he would inject it. No need to translate, no more long-winded formalities. There really did not seem to be enough guards here for what would happen once he did, he thought.

Cautiously, he approached the stage, bowed clumsily for lack of anything better to do, and opened his bag, retrieving and pulling on a pair of rubber gloves. Everything would be fine; he would prove himself a genius yet again, and be back in his laboratory before he knew it.

Peng stood impatiently in the restroom, occasionally peering out and down the hall to his waiting escort. What was taking so long? The car would be here soon, and he'd made it very clear to the driver to take Xiao and go if he wasn't there. His plan couldn't fail now, not when escape was so close for both of them.

There was a sudden noise in the distance, and the guard ran off in the direction of the audience chamber. Finally! Peng emerged, walked quickly but quietly to the end of the hall, and, seeing no one, began making his way through the large, empty hallways toward the exit, half walking, half jogging. The guards he'd passed on his way in had all left their posts, likely summoned to the scene via more direct, restricted routes, and he hoped this to be a good omen for the journey to come.

His ultimate hope was that the chaos in the audience chamber would be reported out to the military as some sort of attack at the palace, drawing every available guard and soldier in the city away from wherever they happened to be stationed. It was a long shot, but the sorts of people attending the audience were nothing if not paranoid; they didn't know the scientist from any other foreigner, and foreigners were not to be trusted. Having one unleash what was, if the scientist's descriptions were correct, a monster, and right in front of the Emperor himself, would, as much as anything, be perceived as some sort of attack. Even now, surely, emergency calls would be going out to every checkpoint and outpost in the Empire. At least, he hoped they were.

The car was waiting for him at the bottom of the grand staircase outside, the driver giving him a knowing nod as he approached. He quickly entered, slammed the door shut, and leaned back in the seat as the car began to move forward, breathing heavily. He wasn't built to move at such speeds on foot, and certainly not for that long.

"How'd it go?" asked Xiao, grinning broadly.

"I do believe," said Peng, finally catching his breath, "that should do the trick." He looked over at Xiao, raising an eyebrow at her expression, far too mischievous given the circumstances. "You've gone and done something, haven't you?"

"Who, me? Noooo, I'm just...so happy to see you, and...to finally be getting out of here," she said, trying very, very hard to stifle her grin.

"I see," said Peng, suspicious. "I am certainly glad to have that over with; I suppose we'll find out soon enough if it worked."

It wasn't far from the palace to the checkpoint in and out of the royal district, though the twisting, winding road purposefully made getting there quickly impossible. At one point, the driver had pulled off to the side to allow a number of military vehicles to pass in the other direction, and, as Peng had hoped, the checkpoint itself was left unmanned.

From there they entered the entertainment district, able to gain a small amount of speed but forced almost immediately to once again slow as they approached the concert hall, a mass of people spilling out into the street. They could see a number of heated arguments taking place between groups, and at least one fight was actively in progress. Another handful of military vehicles had been parked haphazardly around, their occupants seemingly unaware of the events at the palace, merely trying to restore the peace.

Xiao's grin returned as they passed by, and she stared out the window, giving just the tiniest hint of a giggle. Peng, too, stared at the scene, glancing back and forth between it and Xiao before leaning back in his seat again and shaking his head.

"What did you do, Xiao? Do I even want to know?" he asked, closing his eyes and rubbing his temples.

"Probably not, but I'll tell you later anyway," she said, pulling away from the window as the car cleared the area.

Eventually, the brightly lit streets gave way to more modest ones, and Peng looked out the window with some sadness as they passed the turn that would have taken them back to the house.

"Goodbye," he whispered, thinking of all the memories left behind, countless lonely days and endless lonely nights.

Xiao reached over and gently patted his hand. "I'm sorry there wasn't room for more; I know there were a lot of important things we had to leave behind."

He smiled at her. "It's alright; I managed to bring along what was most important to me."

She smiled back, a tinge of sadness in her expression. "It's hard to believe how much has changed in the last few weeks. How much I didn't even know a few months ago, let alone would have imagined learning. Things were...pretty rough there, at the start."

"They were, indeed," said Peng. "But I would do it all over again."

"I mean...not ALL of it, right?" asked Xiao, motioning toward her neck with a smirk.

"Not exactly all of it, no." He sighed. "I don't believe I ever told you; I'd found the front door slightly ajar on one of those first mornings. I...thought for certain you were gone, wondered if I could have done something differently. I'm glad you stayed."

"I'm glad too. Also, sorry, I guess I didn't notice it hadn't closed all the way. You never did find out about those times I sat out there in the middle of the night, did you?"

"You did..." Peng leaned his head back and groaned softly. "Heavens help me,

you would turn my hair gray if I wasn't already bald."

Soon, the street lights stopped altogether, and they continued on in the quiet darkness until they came at last to the checkpoint at the city's edge. It too was abandoned, and Peng breathed a sigh of relief.

Xiao again looked out the rear windshield, watching the bright spotlights fade off into the distance. "So that's it, right?"

"That's all for the city, at least. It will still take quite some time to reach the border and our accommodations for the night, and tomorrow we'll continue on to our new home."

"And then I'm... 'free', I guess," she said, settling back into her seat. "Then what will that make us? Will I be your... daughter?"

"If... if that's what you want... I... had thought you might be happier with a Hybrid couple, but..."

She laughed softly. "What're you kidding? I just got used to you being around all the time; the last thing I need is to start all that over again."

"Ah, yes, I suppose that would just make things more difficult, wouldn't it?"

"Peng..." She sighed. "I barely had a mother, and I never had a father at all. I don't really know how any of this family stuff is supposed to work but... I think you might make a pretty good one."

He chuckled, grateful to the darkness for hiding his tears. "Then I shall try my best."

"That's all anyone can do, right?"

"Right."

Hours later, the car came to a stop outside a large farmhouse.

"Mr. Peng? Mr. Peng, we're here," said the driver, startling Peng awake. "Liu should be out to greet you any moment now."

A lantern appeared outside the door to the house and began to approach, and Peng quietly stepped out of the car into the cool night air. Gradually, a face appeared in the lantern's light; a Hybrid, strong and grizzled, his eyes gentle despite his imposing form. He looked like the one from the driver's photo, albeit somewhat older, now.

"Mr. Peng?" he asked, holding the lantern higher.

"Mr. Liu, I presume," said Peng. "It is good to meet you; thank you again for your generous offer of aid. And, apologies for such a late arrival."

"Of course, of course. I heard ya'd be comin' tonight; was a little worried something might've happened to yas on the way. And, don't you worry; you'd be surprised how many travelers like yourselves we see through here." He waved to the car's driver, who waved back. "Yer things in the trunk?"

"All the same, it is greatly appreciated. And, yes, a single bag each, as per your instructions." Peng leaned back into the car, looking up at the driver.

"Thank you, my friend. Will you be staying, as well?"

"No, unfortunately; I need to get back to the city before whatever the hell you did to distract the guards wears off. There's more people back there like you and I than you might think; people who see Hybrids for who they are instead of what they are. We may not be able to change anything, but I can at least try to help a few more find their way

out. Good luck to you and Miss Xiao, Mr. Peng.”

Peng nodded. “Thank you. Be safe.”

He carefully scooped up the sleeping Xiao in his arms and maneuvered her out the door, pushing it shut as quietly as he could. She was still surprisingly light, just a bit less so, now.

Liu retrieved their bags from the car, slung them effortlessly over one shoulder, and returned to Peng, once again holding the lantern up to examine Xiao.

“Well, stars above, ain’t that just the most adorable lil face you’ve ever seen?” Liu chuckled. “Alright, come on, then; I got a little cabin over here for our ‘guests’ to stay in. I’d let’cha stay in the house but, I’m sure you understand the boys don’t think too highly of folks like yerself.”

“I understand completely; lead the way, Mr. Liu.”

The two began walking toward the back of the farmhouse as the car slowly drove off, and shortly they arrived at a very small outbuilding, though in the dim glow of the lantern, Peng couldn’t really make out much detail. Liu opened the door, turned on the light, and placed the bags inside, stepping aside while Peng carefully set Xiao down on one of two cots against the far wall.

“Would it be alright if she were to visit the house in the morning, if only for a short while?” asked Peng. “This may be the last chance she’ll have to talk with people who truly know where she’s come from; what she’s been through.”

“Of course, of course; I’m sure the boys would just be pleased as punch to meet her. We’ll need to get on the road by noon if we’re gonna getcha down to the city...heh, our city, I mean...before it gets too late in the day. You’ll meet with a fella named Choi; he’ll getcha set up with a place to stay and help ya get started on all the boring paperwork.”

“Wonderful. Thank you again, Mr. Liu; we shall see you in the morning.”

Liu gave a nod and turned back toward the main house. Peng shut the door quietly, turned off the light, lay down on the empty cot, and stared at the ceiling, listening to the soft snore beside him before falling asleep.

Day 1

The truck rumbled its way down the road, Liu at the wheel, Peng and Xiao in the back. It was considerably less comfortable than the car had been, and considerably more bumpy along some of the lesser-maintained roads, but Liu had insisted they’d be at their destination before they knew it, and the longest legs of their journey would be at an end.

“I’m sorry we had to leave so soon,” said Peng. “It sounded like you were having quite a lovely time in the farmhouse.”

Xiao smiled and nodded. “Yeah, the guys there were really nice. It was just...really great to talk to people like that again. People that...really understand, y’know?”

“Yes, I know. Do you still...miss that life?”

“Oh, every day. Don’t get me wrong, I’ve gotten used to things like having more than one pair of clothes, or, y’know, regular meals.” She sighed and stared off into the distance. “But there are some things I think I’ll always miss. Like those silly questions

the kids had, or sleeping out under the stars in the summer.”

“Would you go back now, if you could?”

“It’s funny; that was the one thing I wanted more than anything for so long. Maybe not the farm itself so much as...how simple it all was. I almost feel like I was happier not knowing how complicated the world is. If things hadn’t gone the way they had, and I was still there now...honestly I don’t think that village had that much time left, anyway. No matter how much I thought of it as ‘home’, it was always just going to be temporary. And all those memories would still just be memories, but I wouldn’t have anything to show for it except another village, another farm, another year.”

“I understand.”

They sat together in silence for a while, watching the hills pass by outside, with the occasional house or barn.

“Peng?”

“Yes?”

“We’re gonna be okay, right?”

“I think we will, yes.”

“Okay, just making sure. And, Peng?”

“Hmm?”

“There’s...still things we’re gonna have to talk about someday, whether we want to or not.”

“I know. And when that someday comes, I will give you the truth, even if it hurts.”

“Yeah...”

“And perhaps we can address the most difficult question of all.”

“What’s that?”

“Why are you orange?”

Xiao laughed. “I should never have told you about that.”

“It’s an important question!”

“Come on, cut it out!”

“Alright, alright.”

The sun was beginning to sink low in the sky when they came to a stop just inside the edges of the city they’d soon be calling home. It was a pleasant, quiet neighborhood, not unlike the one they’d left behind, but with more modern-looking houses and vehicles, and perhaps not quite as densely populated.

They’d stopped in front of a stylish, multicolored home, with a small banner hung over the door reading ‘welcome!’ Liu had gone to the door, had a few words with whomever was inside, and returned to the truck, opening the back door to let the pair out.

“Well, alright then, here we are,” he said, motioning for them to exit.

Xiao emerged first, yawning and stretching, followed a moment later by Peng, carrying their bags.

“Thank you again, Mr. Liu,” he said, smiling. “I’m sorry I have nothing I can offer in return.”

Liu pulled him aside, putting an arm around his shoulders. “Now, listen, Mr. Peng. That girl told us you were gonna adopt her and be her father, and I could see in her eye she wanted that more than anything. So I tell you what; you give her the best

damn life you can here, and we'll call it even."

"I promise you I will do everything in my power to do just that," said Peng.

"I'm gonna hold you to that," said Liu. He gave Peng a few friendly slaps on the back and turned to Xiao.

"It sure was nice to meet you, lil lady," he said, reaching down to rustle her hair. "Them boys was just so happy to see you gettin' away from all that."

Xiao laughed and smiled up at him. "Mr. Liu, do you think maybe...I could come visit everyone sometime? After everything settles down? I know it's kind of a long trip."

"I believe we would be honored to have you come and brighten up that farmhouse again with that smile of yours," he said, beaming. "The next time I'm in town, I'll see if I can't get in touch with yas."

"That'd be great. And...thanks, for helping us get here."

Liu crouched down, patting Xiao on the shoulders. "Now, listen. Don't you let no one give you no guff about where you came from. And don't you let no one tell you there's anything you can't do because of it."

"I won't."

"Good. It ain't gonna be easy, especially startin' out; but you are strong enough to get through anything life can throw at ya. You take care of yerself, alright? We'll see ya again before you know it."

Xiao nodded. "I will. Thanks."

He stood and waved at the house, prompting a Hybrid couple to emerge and wave back.

"Alright you two, I best get goin'. Best of luck to ya, though I'm sure you'll do just fine here."

With one last wave, he climbed back into the truck, honked the horn, and drove off. Xiao and Peng waved as he left, watching until the truck vanished from view.

"Alright, Xiao," said Peng. "This is it. A new life, for both of us. How do you feel?"

"A little excited, a little scared," said Xiao. "I feel like I never really thanked you; for getting me out of that cage, for listening to a scared girl who didn't know what else to do."

"You're welcome." He smiled, and took a deep breath, holding out his hand. Xiao took it, squeezing tightly.

"Here we go; are you ready?"

"Ready."

The end